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Statement submitted by Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Addressing the priority theme of the 63rd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW63) without tackling gender as a product of a system of power dynamics — namely Patriarchy — will inevitably end in failure.

The entirety of regulation, governance, economic policies, military structures, religion and cultural mores more broadly, are designed to protect a system which is inherently discriminatory on multiple grounds, and which is very specifically gendered.

In order to achieve the sought after "empowerment" of women and girls, a fundamental re-calibration of the way in which we make choices and act on the choices made, is required. From how we define security to how we realise human rights obligations (in particular relating to economic, social and cultural rights) to how we address inequalities between people and between nations, protect the environment and decide on resource allocation, all must be done on the basis of a recognition that the current system is unsustainable and that we have to commit to re-framing our priorities and approaches.

Two deadly pillars sustain Patriarchy and the current power imbalance: militarism and neo-liberalism. At present we invest more than 1.6 trillion per annum in weapons. A figure likely to increase with the renewed appetite for nuclear warheads by the United States, China and Russia, despit the majority of States supporting a nuclear ban. This choice dwarfs global health ($37.6 billion) and education ($6.8 billion) spending. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) could be fulfilled if we chose differently, and if the SDGs were achieved, we would have no need for the militarised security.

But Militarism is not just about weapons. Militarism is a way of thought: it is how we define security, masculinity and what it demands of women in return. It requires a masculinity which conflates honour and status with the ability to use violence on behalf of those whose interests are vested in the system. Its impact on gender relations is destructive. It is a system used to organise our communities through ever better-armed police and private security companies, addressing the consequences of inequalities and not the causes. It is yet another choice.

The second pillar is neo-liberalism: as a result of which, people around the world are being impoverished, disenfranchised and disempowered. Massive cuts in public spending, privatisation of public services and of our natural resources are putting constraints on our lives, on our dignity, on our solidarity, on our equality as well as on our environmental sustainability.

Neo-liberalism, is merely an economic model. It has become obvious that its extreme application is creating great inequalities and insecurities throughout the world. Neo-liberal flagship policies — "structural adjustment", "fiscal consolidation" — range from cutting social protection, decreasing investments in public services, including, health, education, pensions, social welfare to flexibilisation of labour laws, deregulation of the market, privatisation of public resources and services. These force drastic reduction in government spending on economic, social and cultural rights with a hugely disproportionate effect on women.

The assertion that we have to choose between functional and healthy economies or social, economic and cultural rights of the people is palpably false. We must challenge the assumption that economic growth is the only measure of social progress and possible only through minimal state and public intervention. Neo-liberalism builds and feeds off inequalities. Women and girls empowerment is simply impossible within this economic doctrine.

The Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States on the full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights has recently issued a report on the impact of economic reforms and austerity measures on women's human rights. He describes the current economic system, within countries and between them, as inherently flawed with gender discrimination and asymmetric power relations between women and men. He criticised the role of the international financial institutions which, through their lending programmes, surveillance and technical assistance, prescribe macroeconomic policies that have implications for gender equality.

He is not alone. The Concluding Observations of the sixth periodic report of Germany of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has called out Germany as State member of international financial institutions for not having sufficiently exercised its great leverage to ensure that the borrowing states do not violate their obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Examples are legion: In Ukraine, in accordance with requirements imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), 165,000 civil service jobs were cut during 2014–2015. Women comprise more than 75 per cent of the civil service, predominately in non-managerial positions, and therefore have been disproportionately impacted — and will continue to be — by these cuts.

The privatisation of the healthcare, in parallel with deterioration of the infrastructure and manpower within the public healthcare sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina, have left many Bosnians without access to adequate and proper healthcare. This negative development is forcing women to absorb the deficiency in health services through labour in the household and care economy, further constraining women's formal labour market participation, and subsequently their economic independence.

Feminist economists and activists have taken the lead in calling out the responsibility of international financial institutions for the adverse impact the conditionalities attached to loans have, not just on economic, social and cultural rights but also on the sustainability of the peace itself. Neo-liberal policies many times introduced as a direct result of the IFI conditionalities are adding additional strains on countries recovering from militarised violence and wars, causing new, or feeding into old, grievances over ownership, control and distribution of resources.

Failure to secure basic rights through the provision of public services — education, health care, real employment and social welfare — prevents women's ability to participate as equal citizens in public space. If there is no conscious investment in gender equality as part of the overall economic investments, the burden of picking up the slack of the state will not only fall on women, but women will also most likely remain trapped, balancing between the informal economy (as a means of survival) and unpaid care work.

It is within this neo-liberal framework the global community is also trying to create the concept of empowerment of women. This does not question the structures within which we want to empower women, a structure that is highly patriarchal and entirely built on masculine premises. The co-option of some women into such a system will change very little and empower very few.

Instead, if we choose real empowerment of women and girls, we are better advised to address the political economy of violence against women, which is identified as a greater indicator of national predilection for conflict than Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or levels of democracy.

Again, there are choices: we could choose to invest in education, an education that teaches peace as honourable, rather than war, that rejects our binary notions of gender and the power differentials. We could choose to invest in alleviating poverty, to close tax havens (where some 30 trillion dollars sit idly by), to move money from arms into human rights in particular social and economic rights ... the list of things that we could choose to do is self-evident. We lack only the political will and a belief in the possibility to do so.

So, in this Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom calls on Member States to recall the promises made in the Charter of the United Nations, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in all human rights treaties subsequent. To realise equality and uphold human rights through national investment in public services, through development and investment policies that reflect environmentally sustainable and inclusive economies, eschewing the neo-liberal agenda.

We cannot have both militarism, neo-liberalism and also realise sustainable development, peace and gender equality. We have a choice, and we need to make the right one!